

Rabbi Lewis' message for March 2006

I live in a small town that is more rural than suburban. The town looks like a typically prosperous Somerset County community; the fact that a local immigrant population lives here goes almost unnoticed. They come from somewhere in Central or South America. You can see the men at the local train station as early as 6 a.m., waiting to be picked up for their jobs as day-laborers. The train station offers a kind of aromatic tea, unfamiliar to me, that represents one small piece of evidence that these people live among us. They live a shadow existence, painting our houses, mowing our lawns and shoveling our snow. Sometimes you see them walking home along the main streets, carrying Shop Rite bags. In my town, "home" apparently consists of illegal rooming houses. You can see them, too, at the local library, sitting at computer terminals and writing emails to their families back home. They bear the separation in order to make a better life for their children.

Recently one of these workers made a botched kidnapping attempt on a local woman. It was a terrible story, this story of a disgruntled former-employee of a lawn service who kidnapped his ex-boss's wife for the purpose of collecting a ransom. Fortunately for her, she escaped and is safe now, although who knows what the emotional impact has been for her and her family. But rather than seeing this as the act of one person, misguided or criminal or deranged, this attempted kidnapping brought previously whispered-about issues into the public domain. Local residents wrote in to the local paper saying that they are afraid to go to the train station in the morning because "those people" are there. They avoid walking near these illegal rooming houses because they are afraid of "them."

I don't want to dismiss or sit in judgment on anyone else's fears but I am uneasy about how this population has suddenly become "the other." They are spoken and written about as if they are less than human, as if their needs are not the same as the needs of their neighbors. We Jews know what this feels like, to be dehumanized. "If you prick us, do we not bleed?" pleads Shylock. People are frightened of the stranger whose ways they do not understand and so they demonize strangers as "other." Why else would the Torah tell us how to treat the stranger, reminding us that we were strangers in the land of Egypt? We wouldn't need to be commanded to treat the stranger well if we could be relied upon to do it instinctively.

My primary interest doesn't lie in resolving the specific issues of illegal rooming houses, although I have been tempted to volunteer my untutored aid; I am interested in Judaism's attitude toward the stranger in our midst. Just a few generations ago, it was my Uncle Charlie who was speaking with an accent while he painted houses so his family could have a better life. This great country offered him opportunities unheard of for Jews in what he referred to as "the Old Country." Now that we are here a few generations, have we forgotten what it feels like to be a stranger? We know that the world is a dangerous place. Purim reminds us that in every generation, a new Amalek will rise up against us. We don't remember for memory's sake. Passover forces us to remember and relive the experience of oppression so that we can make sure it doesn't happen again. Because we know what it feels like, we are left with no choice but to speak up.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis
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